



Staff Report for Committee of the Whole Meeting

Date of Meeting: February 6, 2017

Report Number: SRCFS.17.005

Department: Corporate and Financial Services

Division: Office of the Clerk

Subject: 2018 Municipal Election – Internet Voting

Purpose:

To seek approval to use internet voting as an alternative voting method during the 2018 municipal election advance vote only

Recommendation(s):

- a) That staff report SRCFS.17.005 be received;
- b) That, pursuant to section 42(1)(b) of the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, a by-law be enacted to authorize the use of internet voting as an alternative voting method during the 2018 municipal election advance vote only; and
- c) That funding for the internet voting initiative be funded, in an amount not to exceed \$200,000 (exclusive of taxes), from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve.

Contact Person:

Stephen M.A. Huycke, Director, Council Support Services/Town Clerk, Extension 2529

Submitted by:

David Dexter
Acting Commissioner of Corporate and Financial Services

Approved by:

Neil Garbe
Chief Administrative Officer

Background:

The next regular municipal election will take place on Monday October 22, 2018. All municipal elections are governed by the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, S.O. 1996, c. 32, (the “Act” or “MEA”). Section 42(1)(b) of the Act permits municipal Council’s to pass a by-law “...authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote.”

The adoption of technology in elections is becoming a worldwide trend. Digital elections tools, such as voter’s list management software, on-line voter registration and internet voting are important tools necessary to modernize elections. Internet voting allows electors to vote from anywhere so long as they have access to the internet. Where available, electors are able to cast their ballot on a computer or other electronic devices such as tablets and cellphones. Richmond Hill Council considered the use of internet voting prior to the 2014 municipal election. At its meeting on December 10, 2012 Council directed that the option of internet voting not be pursued for the 2014 election. The Town Clerk is recommending the use of internet voting during the 2018 advance vote only. Vote Tabulators and paper ballots will also be available for the advance vote, as well as being the only voting method available on voting day.

Internet voting - General

In 2014, 97 of Ontario’s 444 municipalities (22%) used internet voting in the 2014 election, meaning that this option was available to approximately 2 million voters. This was a significant increase in the number of municipalities using internet voting (up from 44 in 2010). Both urban municipalities (Markham, Burlington, Guelph, etc.) and rural municipalities used internet voting in 2014. For many rural municipalities internet voting was the only method of voting available to electors, while the urban municipalities tended to make internet voting available during advance vote only and deployed vote tabulators and paper ballots on Election Day.

Since 2014 there has also been an increased focus on studying the risks and benefits of internet voting, as well as increased polling to understand Canadian perceptions of internet voting. For example, as part of the 2014 Ontario municipal election, Dr. Nicole Goodman, Director of the Centre for e-Democracy and Assistant Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs, undertook a comprehensive academic study of internet voting, examining the impact of voting technology on elections. As an additional example, the recent House of Commons Committee study on Electoral Reform included an examination of the possibility of using internet voting in future Federal Elections.

Internet voting Advantages

Some of the key benefits of internet voting are:

- Encourages participation of voters who may be less inclined to visit a physical voting location.

- Provides additional voting opportunities for students, vacationers, and those who work long hours outside of the Town.
- Reduces the need for the use of voter proxies, which is both a labour intensive process for staff and an onerous voting method for voters
- Is environmentally friendly, reducing the need for paper ballots as well as the carbon footprint of driving to a voting location.
- Significantly reduce barriers to independent voting for persons with disabilities.
- Increases voter turnout.¹

One of the prime advantages of internet voting is that it enhances the convenience of voting for a broad range of voters. It is reflective of changing lifestyles and demographics. It also increases the accessibility of elections for a variety of voters. Internet voting allows an eligible voter to vote when they want from where they want. It reflects how many voters currently engage in their communities (e.g. online communications, banking, shopping, etc.). Another principal advantage of Internet voting is that systems are fully accessible, allowing voters with disabilities to vote independently (i.e. without assistance from family, friends or election workers) often for the first time ever. It is a fundamental tool to remove barriers to civic participation for person with disabilities.

Recent studies have indicated that internet voting increases voter turnout. In her August 23, 2016 presentation to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform, Dr. Goodman testified, based on studies of the 2010 election, that internet voting increased voter turnout in Ontario by approximately 3%. While not a significant amount, any increase in voter turnout is a welcome change. Voter turnout is, however, a complex issue and no single action will correct the low turnout observed in Ontario municipal elections. Voter participation is impacted by a myriad of factors, including, the importance of various issues to an individual voter, a voter's knowledge of the candidates and positions, voter apathy, voter fatigue, education and other socioeconomic factors, geography, trust of government, the level of competition between candidates, and even the weather. Most of these factors are beyond the control of the Clerk, the Town and even candidates.

Internet voting Challenges

Some of the key challenges of internet voting are:

- Perception of security concerns for internet systems.
- Voter authentication security.
- A perceived reduction in voting process oversight by, for example, candidates and scrutineers
- The level of the internet access available within a community

¹ Goodman, Dr. Nicole, remarks to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform, August 23, 2016. (Retrieved on January 11, 2017 <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=e&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1&DocId=8400236>)

- The cost (financial and labour) of administering a second method of voting.

Internet voting is a form of unsupervised voting (other forms of unsupervised voting include vote by mail, absentee ballots, and vote by telephone). The most common concerns with internet voting are those related to the security of the internet voting system. Hacking, denial of service (DoS) attacks, virus and other malware, etc., are common concerns with any internet based system. These challenges, however, can be addressed through both technical and process solutions. Should Council approve Internet Voting as part of the 2018 election strategy, staff will undertake a comprehensive system security review in late 2017. If the review identifies any vulnerabilities that cannot be adequately addressed or mitigated the Clerk would still have the option of not deploying the online voting system.

Additional concerns are often expressed about authenticating voters (e.g. by checking identification). Internet voting processes, however, can address these concerns. The Clerk intends to adopt a two-part, four factor voter authentication model. In this model:

- eligible voters whose names appear on the voters list will receive a registration identification number (“RIN”) in the mail.
- using the RIN and another unique identifier such as a birthdate a voter will login to the registration system to register their intent to vote online.
- during registration, the voter will be required to create a unique password.
- following registration the voter will then be sent a voting identification number (“VIN”) which is different from the RIN.
- Using VIN and password, the voter can login to the internet voting system to cast their ballot.

Financial/Staffing/Other Implications:

Richmond Hill’s election budget funds the planning, operation and execution of every municipal election, including all post-election related expenses. Annually, in non-election years, the Town provides for the municipal election administration through contributions to the Election reserve. In the election year the balance in the reserve as well as the costs associated with any enhanced program is transferred to the operating fund to cover the costs of the election. As reported in staff report SRCFS.17.004, the expected base election budget for 2014 is \$865,000. The proposed internet voting initiative is a program enhancement. Staff are recommending that the proposed internet voting initiative be funded from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve in an amount not to exceed an estimated \$200,000. The estimated costs for the internet voting initiative include and allocation of \$25,000 to conduct a comprehensive system security review. Approval of the internet voting initiative will bring the total 2018 election budget to \$1,065,000.

Relationship to the Strategic Plan:

The implementation of internet voting in Richmond Hill would address the Strategic Plan goal of “stronger connections in Richmond Hill” by providing an alternative voting

technology. Doing so would further assist in the removal of barriers to effective participation for all members of the community given that the municipal election process represents the preeminent means of democratic participation.

Conclusion:

The adoption of technology in elections is becoming a worldwide trend. Internet voting has been used in Ontario municipal elections since 2003. In 2010, 99 of Ontario's 444 municipalities used internet voting. Internet voting enhances the convenience of voting for a broad range of voters, as well as significantly removes barriers to voting for persons with disabilities. There are, however, risks associated with any unsupervised voting methodology. The successful use of internet voting in other municipalities demonstrates, however, that any challenges or risks associated with implementing internet voting in the Richmond Hill's 2018 election can be mitigated and addressed. It is, therefore, recommended that the use of internet voting for the 2018 election advance vote be approved.

Attachments:

None